THIS IS THE second extract to appear in this magazine from Mrs. Dingwall's recollections of her childhood on a farm near Elk River. An earlier article, entitled "Pioneers' Dinner Table," was published in the summer of 1954. The author now lives in Superior, Wisconsin.

Some FRONTIER REMEDIES and SUPERSTITIONS

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THE FIRST twelve years of my life, from 1877 to 1889, were spent on a farm about a mile from the village of Elk River. In those days, doctors were few and far between, and hospitals were places to be avoided at all cost. In preventing and treating illness, families relied largely on home doctor books, patent medicines, tried and true home remedies, and faith and superstition.

When someone was ill in our family, a doctor was rarely called because there was little money to pay for his services. Then, too, it was necessary to hitch up the horses and drive way into town to get a doctor, and probably a second trip would have to be made to take him home. Mother was the family nurse in our home, and in my grandparents' as well. She used a variety of family home remedies that seemed to bring us out of our troubles.

Colds, of course, were among the family's most frequent complaints, and quite a number of treatments existed for them. To relieve a chest cold mother used poultices made from unpeeled onions which had been baked in the ashes of the old wood-burning cookstove. When they were tender, the onions were removed from the ashes, crushed, put in a folded piece of flannel, and applied to the sufferer's chest and the soles of his feet.

Father's infallible cold cure—used only on himself—was a hot "sling" made of pure alcohol, sugar, and hot water. This he swallowed as hot as he could stand it before retiring for the night. A jar of goose grease, to be rubbed on the patient's chest, always stood handy in the medicine cabinet to aid in loosening up a cold.

Sore throats were relieved by wrapping a piece of flannel moistened in kerosene around the afflicted part. Sometimes an old stocking was substituted for the flannel; there was more virtue in one which had been worn and was somewhat soiled.

Mother had a cure for the grippe which no one else dared administer because of the hazardous nature of the treatment. It consisted of an alcohol sweat. The patient, wrapped in blankets, was seated in a large wooden rocking chair, beneath which on the floor was placed a small metal container partly filled with flaming alcohol. To keep the heat from escaping, a blanket reaching to the floor was wrapped around both chair and patient. Before long the sufferer was dripping with perspiration. When he could endure the heat no longer, he went to bed.
still wrapped in blankets, and by morning all his aches and pains had disappeared.

Effective as many of these home remedies were, they could not, of course, cure all ills, and much suffering was endured which might have been avoided had there been better medical care. I recall the torture my father endured when he had an attack of rheumatism which caused his feet to swell so that he could not wear shoes. In spite of the pain he must have been suffering, he drew on large, heavy woolen socks and walked over the rough fields, steadying the old horse plow with his hands until the spring plowing was completed.

I remember well the many times that one of my uncles would come to our house in the middle of the night and awaken mother with the words, “Come quick, Jen, Ma’s got another spell.” Hurriedly we children would be taken out of our beds, dressed and hustled off to grandmother’s, where we were again put to bed for the rest of the night. There was never much sleep for me, though, because Grammy’s moans and cries could be heard throughout the house.

She was apparently in great pain. Mother would try every remedy she knew, but nothing seemed to help. It always ended with grandfather hitching up the horse and racing to town to fetch the doctor. He had no idea what caused the spells of pain, but he would give grandmother a shot of morphine. She would sleep after that, but the following day she would be very ill from the effects of the drug. She had many recurrences of these spells, but eventually they seemed to wear away. We never did know what caused them, but the passing of the years seems to have made them fade away. I am convinced that they were gall bladder attacks.

Since we had no dentists, young and old alike went to the family doctor when a toothache became unbearable. The usual cure was supplied by a pair of forceps manipulated by the physician. Father said that in the lumber camps the men sometimes resorted to the hammer and nail method to knock out an offending tooth. That seems a rather harsh treatment, but I could not doubt the veracity of his statement.

ONE OF the most dreaded diseases of the day was smallpox, and vaccination was almost equally to be feared. I first became acquainted with carbolic acid while watching mother care for my father when he was suffering from the effects of a vaccinated arm. Each morning she bathed it in water to which a few drops of carbolic acid had been added.

I was too young to know just why father had been vaccinated. He was very bitterly opposed to vaccination, but an epidemic of smallpox had broken out while he was working with a railroad track-laying crew, and the railroad company probably insisted on it. He had a terrible arm, and for a time we feared that he might lose it. Others in the area had the same experience, and I seem to remember someone saying that the vaccine must have been impure.

One day my sister, busy as most children can be at the age of three, took the washcloth which mother used to wash father’s sore arm and very carefully bathed a fresh scratch on her own leg with it. In time, she too had a perfect vaccination sore on her leg, and later she was very proud to be able to show a scar just like papa’s.

During the smallpox epidemic, an incident occurred that struck terror to my young heart whenever I heard my elders speak of it. In a desperate attempt to isolate victims of the disease, authorities hurriedly threw together a pesthouse—a one-room shack of green lumber several miles out in the woods. A delirious patient who was being taken to the place broke away and ran some distance in a downpour of rain before he could be caught. He was then placed in the cold, damp building, and as a result he died. Friends and neighbors of the dead man were up in arms about the tragedy, but nothing could be done.

Many times I heard my mother tell of a happier event which occurred when I was
too young to remember it. It seems that the doctor in the community at the time was a very good physician who had but one weakness—a love of strong drink. As the saying went, “He liked his bitters.” My sister, Issie, who was at that time in her second summer, had a severe attack of cholera infantum. Mother’s remedies had no effect, and Issie became so weak that she could not sit up. Father in desperation hurried to the village to see the doctor. He learned that the medical man had gone to Minneapolis but was expected to return on the evening train. Father waited and was at the depot to meet him.

The doctor alighted all right, but was too intoxicated to stand alone. With father’s help, however, he managed to reach his office. He listened to father’s story and then fumbling around found some medicine and instructed him to give the child a teaspoonful of it with some boiled spring water every couple of hours. Luckfly we had a spring on our place, and the directions were followed. Mother said that an hour after she had given Issie the first dose, the baby raised herself up and asked for a drink of water. Her recovery was rapid and quite miraculous.

Although it was sometimes necessary to call a doctor, my elders had implicit faith in the wonderful healing powers of many simple things found in the home and outside in the fields and garden. For example, sliced, raw potatoes bound on the head relieved a headache, and warm vinegar mixed with salt made a good liniment. When children were pale, nervous, and irritable, it was quite likely that they were suffering from worms, so a few drops of turpentine in a spoonful of sugar were administered.

Wild mullein leaves were gathered, dried, and smoked in clay pipes as a remedy for asthma and throat troubles. Asafetida worn around the neck was believed to ward off contagious diseases, but those who wore it were shunned by others because of its offensive odor. Tea leaves left in the pot were drained and preserved in a cloth bag to sooth tired eyes. The milk contained in the stems of the first spring dandelions when rubbed on a mole would cause it to disappear. To get rid of warts, it was necessary to dig up an old bone, rub it on the wart, and then rebury it.

No one needed to suffer from a stomach ache, for ginger tea would cure it “quick as a cat can wink its eye.” Binding a piece of fat salt pork to the infected part was father’s way of drawing out a sliver embedded in the flesh. During the winter months he had considerable trouble with his skin cracking, especially on his feet. Each night before retiring he would sit by the fire and patiently fill each of the cracks with black shoemaker’s wax. It was the only remedy he ever used.

When grandfather cut off the end of one of his fingers in a wood-sawing machine, some cobwebs hanging from the ceiling of the barn were hurriedly applied to stop the bleeding. Then his hand was thoroughly cleansed with warm water and carbolic acid, a good bandage was applied, and grandfather had no serious trouble afterward.

Why call a doctor when home remedies did the trick? Developed over generations by trial and error, these homely remedies were frequently the pioneer’s only protection against disease. Although some of them had their base in superstition, many did bring effective relief.

GRANDFATHER was very superstitious, and I think most of his children inherited the trait. Mother clung fast to many of his signs. He would never under any circumstances, for example, begin on a Friday a new piece of work, such as plowing or planting. He considered the number thirteen unlucky. If it were discovered that thirteen people were seated at the table for a meal, one person had to leave or a fourteenth had to be found. Otherwise one of the thirteen people would die before a year passed.

Many other omens foretold death—a bird...
flying into the house, a dog howling outside of the door, or a partridge coming near the house. Rain falling into an open grave meant another death in the family within a year.

There were signs, too, that warned of the coming of trouble. Rain on a wedding day foretold unhappiness, as did the stubbing of a toe by either bride or groom on their way to the altar. The gift of a knife, a scissors, or some other sharp instrument would cut a friendship; and thanking the giver of a plant would cause it to die. If you spilled salt, it was necessary to scrape up some immediately and burn it to avoid a quarrel in the offing.

Some signs told of more cheerful events. If two knives or two forks were left at the same plate in setting the table, a wedding could be expected. If you dropped a fork or any other pointed utensil and it stuck upright in the floor, you could look for a visitor. Dropping a dish towel also meant company, and a visitor entering through one door of the house and leaving by another would bring more guests. Taking a piece of bread while you still had some on your plate foretold the coming of a hungry visitor. If your right palm itched, you were going to shake hands, but if it were the left you would get money. When the little bubbles formed in circles on the surface of tea or coffee, they were carefully dipped up and swallowed, for they would bring wealth.

As a child I was very fond of tea. Mother told me that was why I had a swarthy complexion — tea darkened the skin. A beauty aid for the hair was supplied at butchering time. After the pigs had been butchered, we children went around for days wearing on our heads the skin of the pig's bladder because it was supposed to have the power to promote hair growth. Since my sister and I had thin, dull hair, we were willing to do almost anything to promote the growth of long, thick hair like other little girls.

As might be expected, many signs predicted the weather. Mother used to tell us that a cat eating grass was a sure sign of rain. A "wet moon" also indicated a rainy spell, because the "old Indian can't hang his powder horn on the tip." If he did, it would slide off.

"A winter's fog will freeze a dog," the saying went, for fog in winter was thought to be a forerunner of colder weather. Sun dogs, visible occasionally on bright, sunny, winter mornings, also meant colder weather. When squirrels did not store a good supply of acorns, folks said an open winter would follow, while an extra heavy coat of fur on wild animals foretold a severe winter.

Like his home remedies, my grandfather felt that his faith in signs gave him a measure of protection. As farmers, members of my family were at the mercy of an environment over which they had no control. Signs, superstitions, and even home remedies in a sense gave them at least a feeling of mastery over certain of the harsh realities of frontier life.

Memorials

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY has a Memorial Fund to which contributions can be made upon the loss of a relative or friend. Such gifts not only serve as appropriate expressions of sympathy and condolence, but they help to support work that is a fitting memorial to any Minnesotan.

Whenever a contribution is received for the Memorial Fund, a suitable card is mailed to the bereaved family, and the names of those whose memories are honored, as well as of contributors, are recorded in a Memorial Book.

Use the blank that follows in contributing to the Memorial Fund:

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